DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 298 318 CE 050 883

AUTHOR Fennimore, Todd F.
TITLE The Helping Process Booklet for Mentors. Dropout Prevention Series.
INSTITUTION Ohio State Univ., Columbus. National Center for Research in Vocational Education.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Vocational and Adult Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 88
GRANT G008620030
NOTE 14p.; For other guides in this series, see CE 050 879-889.
AVAILABLE FROM National Center Publications, National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1960 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090 (Order No. SP700HP05--$5.50 (package of five copies); related videocassette, SP700HP07--$25.00; set of six Helping Process booklets and videocassette, SP700HP--$39.50).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Education; Counseling; *Dropout Prevention; *Dropout Programs; Dropouts; Guides; *Helping Relationship; High Risk Students; *Interpersonal Relationship; Intervention; *Mentors; Modeling (Psychology); *Observational Learning; Potential Dropouts; Role Models; Secondary Education; Significant Others

ABSTRACT

This booklet for mentors is part of a series of program materials for a school-based intervention process to help at-risk students stay in school. An introduction discusses the role of the mentor and the skills a mentor will need to promote the student's self-development. These skills are listening actively, problem solving, developing motivation, clarifying goals, sharing information, linking to others, and being an advocate. Some activities for the mentor are also suggested. (YLB)

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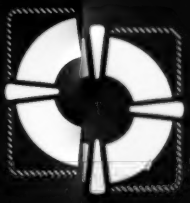

DROPOUT PREVENTION SERIES

The Helping Process Booklet for Mentors

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THE HELPING PROCESS BOOKLET FOR MENTORS

Todd F. Fennimore
Sandra G. Pritz, Project Director

SP700HP05

The work presented herein was developed by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education pursuant to a grant with the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education. Grantees undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official U.S. Department of Education position or policy.

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INTRODUCTION

NOTE TO MENTORS Please read *The Helping Process Overview Guidebook* before you begin this booklet for helping process mentors. The guidebook contains important information about the helping process that you will need to make the most of this mentor booklet for yourself and the student that you help.

Working as a Helping Process Mentor

For many students, adolescence is a long and painful odyssey. Parents and teachers have important roles to play in guiding students during that time. Parents focus on their children's emotional development. Teachers can arrange educational experiences to promote students' intellectual and career development.

Mentors have another role to play. We all remember the mentors in our lives—the people who opened up opportunities for us, warned us of pitfalls, advised us on how to negotiate "the system," and encouraged us to continue, even in the face of hardship. They were trusted counselors or guides who made a personal investment in us. We looked to them for guidance. And most important of all, our identification with them helped us to form our own identity.

Adolescence is such a tortuous time because it is a time when a person struggles with such basic questions, "Who am I?" and "Where

am I going?" These are not abstract, philosophical questions, but vital, everyday concerns causing great personal turmoil. Questions about self-identity become paramount at this time. The role of the mentor is to aid the student in promoting the most essential of all developmental areas—self, or existential, development.

As you reflect on what you should do as a mentor, remember that your first concern is to help the student define who he or she is, open up possibilities for career and personal development, and provide guidance in solving everyday problems. As a mentor, you have the opportunity to help the student realize his or her full potential.

The mentor-student relationship is a very personal one, and the relationship should be based on personal choice as much as possible. Ideally, mentors should not be assigned a student, but they should choose each other. Assignments may need to be made in some cases, however, albeit sensitively and carefully.

The mentor will need to use a number of skills to promote the student's self-development. It is the mentor's responsibility to exercise these skills. The skills are:

- **Listening Actively**

  This is the most important of all skills to master. We've all had the experience of talking to a friend about a problem that we haven't discussed yet with our family or employer because we know that the friend will simply listen to us. We don't want advice, we don't want to be told about how the other person feels, and we don't want to create anxiety in the other person. We merely want to be understood.

  Teachers, parents, and bosses want us to fulfill certain, expectations. This is only appropriate and positive. But it is often nice to have someone to talk to who is not expecting something of you.

  A mentor can be such a person. A mentor can really hear what the student says and express an understanding of the student's problems. A mentor can say, "I've had the same problem," without being inappropriate. In a sense, the mentor has complete freedom to listen and identify.

- **Problem Solving**

  Adolescents may be so confused about where they are going and why they are going there that their ability to solve problems is greatly impaired. Most adolescents have just begun to realize that things can be different from how they are now, so they are not accustomed to thinking of many possible alternatives to a problematic situation. Because of your experience and thinking skill, a solution that seems obvious to you may never occur to your student. Even more confusing to the adolescent is not knowing whether a problem is actually a problem because the student doesn't know what he or she desires. A problem is an obstacle to achieving a goal—if you aren't certain of your goals, how can you clearly define a problem?

  A useful activity, then, is to engage the student in a mutual problem solving process. By listening carefully to the student, you can help the student clarify his or her goals and, therefore, recognize problems. Once a problem is defined, you can help the student generate a number of ways to respond to the problem. A student may be unaware of resources with which you are familiar. And a student may be unaware of ways to respond to having problems in school other than dropping out. You can help the student weigh all the alternatives and make a decision. For example, you can discuss with the student the negative consequences of dropping out. Then you can encourage the student to follow a plan of action to succeed in school. This will reinforce the Individualized Helping Plan (IHP)of the team.

- **Developing Motivation**

  Motivation is often considered an innate, and stable characteristic of a personality. But a person who is bored and apathetic in one situation or environment may be enthusiastic and outgoing in another situation or environment. So motivation is something that can be increased or decreased. When a person feels it is possible to succeed; when the task is important to the person and others important to the person; when the person hasn't had a prior history of frustration and failure in the environment; when a

person finds the accomplishment meaningful and its performance enjoyable; when a person feels that he or she belongs in that environment—all these things and more will motivate the person to succeed in that environment. Many dropout-prone students have faced repeated failure in school and they have become discouraged. They think they will never be able to succeed and they need a lot of encouragement and praise to overcome this resignation. Many have given up on ever being able to succeed at anything.

A mentor can develop motivation in a student by balancing hope with discomfort. A mentor can bolster the student's confidence that he or she **can** change and succeed and that the student has the ability and resources to improve life. At the same time you shouldn't hesitate to provide frank feedback (after you have built up a trusting relationship)and produce some discomfort about the present self-defeating behavior of the student. If the student identifies personal goals, does the student see how some present behaviors will not help in working toward those goals? Confront the student on this self-defeating behavior but be supportive by pointing out that you know the student has the strength to change the behavior so that the student can realize dreams. In this way, you can, by producing discomfort **and** infusing hope, motivate the student to change.

- **Clarifying goals**

The mentor works with the student to develop long-range goals for academic and personal life. The mentor may help the student consider possibilities that the student never imagined. If you foster the student's identification with you by expressing understanding and empathy, the student will come to think "My mentor made it, I'm like my mentor in a lot of ways, so I can make it too!" This will also motivate students when they see others like themselves succeeding, they begin to see that they can succeed, and they are motivated to become successful.

As a mentor, you help the student become aware of what unique and valuable contributions the student has to make to the world. (Important: You do not dictate what the student should do, you point out possibilities.) You can help the student clarify life goals

by relating your own struggle to establish identity and achieve goals. Emphasize the role that education has played in the enrichment of your life and achievement of your goals. Once the mentor has helped the student think about the student's long-term goals, the mentor can guide the student to break these goals down into short-term, manageable, weekly activities. Help the student become more goal-directed by constantly questioning the student: "Is what you are doing now going to help you realize your long-term goals? What will you need to plan for in the future to achieve all that you want to achieve?"

- **Sharing Information**

Consistent with its traditional meaning, a mentor is someone who advises and supports a person in advancing in a career. The helping process mentor carries out this part of the role by helping the student negotiate the system. You can guide the student by explaining the system—the pitfalls to be avoided and the short-cuts to be pursued. The mentor can expose the student to the world of work and advise the student on what is needed to find and achieve meaning. The student can begin to see work in its most dignified light—as the fulfillment of meaning valuable to oneself and others, as an opportunity to give and receive. A student anxious about the future will be comforted in hearing of the ups and downs of the mentor's life and how the mentor made it through the rough spots. This will reassure the student that "for every down, there's an up" if opportunities are seized and problems are coped with effectively. Telling a student about your own life is an indirect way to suggest more effective coping strategies than the student may use now. It helps the student consider all opportunities. The mentor can be greatly influential in opening up doors for a student, helping the student make informed and rational life choices, and guiding constructive courses of action.

The mentor can promote a strong bond between himself or herself and the student by providing career and personal guidance. The student may come to an older, or a more experienced friend who is a mentor with problems related to growing up, peers, difficulties in school, or future plans. Some of the issues will concern health issues like alcohol, drugs, sex, and disease.

Other problems might relate to peer pressure, vandalism, running away, or divorce. The mentor can share information with the student to help him or her make decisions that effectively address the problem or help the student find the people and resources to acquire this information.

- **Linking to Others**

The mentor can link the student to resources in the community. You can provide the student with a contact to your world, the broader community. Perhaps you can help the student get a job if you are in business or let the student shadow you at work and make contacts there. Perhaps you know people who can help the student get a job, receive services, or pursue opportunities for postsecondary education.

Many students at risk of dropping out feel disconnected from school and the community. Helping the student establish links will reconnect the student, make the student feel as though he or she has a valuable contribution to make to the community, now and in the future. You can be the student's contact; the person who sponsors the student in the school and community. In return for your sponsorship, the student is motivated to use the existing services in the school and community. And the student is better motivated to work with the team. You have then facilitated access to resources for the student.

- **Advocacy**

The mentor is in a relationship with the student that gives the mentor unique insights into the student's situation. Because the mentor does not have to exercise any authority over the student, the student may feel more free to open up to the mentor than to any other adult. The mentor may then be the first adult to know of an emerging problem. The mentor may also be the only adult who has heard and understood all aspects of the student's situation.

This puts the mentor in a special position to advocate for the student—to speak up for the student and let others know the

student's circumstances. A fuller understanding will make possible a compassionate response from others involved in the life of the student. The mentor can act as an advocate on behalf of the student when problems in school occur. And since advocacy is an important function of the team as a whole, the mentor is a crucial team player.

SUMMARY

Mentors are in a special position. They have a chance to relate to students in ways parents and schools usually don't. Parents and school people are necessarily authority figures. But a mentor can simply be a friend. The mentor is a special kind of friend because of his or her age and/or experience. The mentor can provide sound guidance, but doesn't have to exert control. The mentor can relate to the student more informally and personally. In a sense, the parent(s) and school, realizing the nature of their involvement, have asked a mutual friend to talk to the student. This friend of the school and parent is also a friend of the student, so the mentor can be an effective intermediary. By being such a link, the mentor can help the student navigate in the adult world and the world of work.

SOME ACTIVITIES FOR THE MENTOR

Here are some suggestions for making the most of your role as mentor:

—Tell the student about yourself and school. Talk to the student about your successes and troubles in school. Tell the student how school has helped you. Solve problems about school matters with the student.

—Offer support for school success. Tutor the student and help the student with homework or missed class work. Encourage regular school attendance. Provide tips on study skills. Help the student devote time to study.

—Advise and support the student in making transitions—from junior high to senior high, from one school to another. These are critical periods for the student when he or she will be most likely to drop out without extra support.

—Develop a full understanding with the student of why the student has been having problems functioning in school. Discuss all the factors that get in the way of completing school—school related, family-related, peer-related, and individual factors.

—Explore all aspects of the student's life. If you discover problems that seem too "big" for you (sexual or physical abuse, rape, pregnancy, drug abuse), let other team members know **immediately** and start a referral process. You can provide an ear and support. You can give the student reassurance that these events don't make the person "bad." Especially in cases of sexual abuse or rape, the student will feel very guilty and will need to be continually reminded that he or she was the victim and is not responsible. Naturally, these matters are to be kept in strictest confidence with the team and other involved professionals. Remember that you may, in many states, be legally obligated to report cases of physical or sexual abuse. In any case, you are morally obligated to report abuse to professionals.

—Reinforce the Individualized Helping Plan (IHP) to clarify the student's goals. Aid the student in developing post-high school options. Be aware of feedback from the student that indicates that the IHP should be modified. As you increase your understanding of the student, it is natural that plans for the student will need to be changed. Discuss this with team members also.

—Take your student to your place of work to expose him or her to the world of work and to help the student formulate career plans.

—Serve as a positive role model for the student, demonstrating punctuality, dependability, and reliability.

—Many dropout prone students lack interpersonal skills. Suggest ways that the student can be appropriately assertive and constructively resolve conflicts.

—Most crucial of all, BUILD SELF-ESTEEM!